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ABSTRACT

By helping students acquire deliberative skills, community colleges can help develop citizen leaders who can engage in public discussion about values that are commonly shared but differently applied. Moreover, deliberative skills, consisting of active listening, creative conflict, public dialogue, and public judgment, can provide a fresh approach to active learning in the classroom. Leaders in learning organizations are responsible for building organizations where people are continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future, while the greatest service a leader can provide is to help others develop and sustain good working relationships. One important resource for implementing this kind of approach in the classroom is the study circle, in which small groups discuss and deliberate together to make decisions. In study circles, participants must listen with an open mind and strive to understand the position of those who disagree with them. Ideas and differences can be freely expressed and challenged, but participants are responsible for monitoring their attitude, body language, and use of reason versus emotion. Study circles can train students to move beyond data and arguments as presented in lectures or textbooks to a consideration of information within a broad social context. (HAA)

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ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH PUBLIC DELIBERATION:

A FRESH APPROACH TO ACTIVE LEARNING

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melanie Smith, Director of Continuing Education/Community Services has worked for Black Hawk College in the area of adult education. She received her BA and MS from Western Illinois University. She participated in the Kettering Foundation training program for National Issues Forums; her interest in Study Circles is a natural progression evolving from N.I.F.

Mary Alice Stewart, Dean of Health and Transitional Programs, has worked for Black Hawk College for over twenty years. She received her BS from St. Mary of-the-Woods College, her MA from the University of Iowa and EdD from Nova University. She has taught at junior high, high school and college level. At the College she served as counselor and Director of Counseling Services. In addition to her current duties, she is director of the Black Hawk College Leadership Institute.

Both Mary Alice and Melanie have taught deliberative skills and used study circles with diverse groups - student government, alternative education students, law enforcement students, students in a correctional center, and as part of each community leadership program developed and presented through the Black Hawk College Leadership Institute.

Enhancing Student Learning through Public Deliberation:

A Fresh Approach to Active Learning

Citizen leaders are waiting to be discovered and to discover that they are leaders, leaders who can make a difference in the community that surrounds them. One set of skills we can use to develop leaders is deliberative skills. Deliberative skills enable public discussion about values that are commonly shared but differently applied. Through public deliberation, citizens can play an important role in shaping their community, shaping their nation. Communities across the country see growing community problems such as homelessness, racism, violence, environmental pollution, poverty, crime. Coupled with this is a growing loss of confidence in national and state leadership. Citizens can and are stepping forward to make a difference in their community. Through acquiring deliberative skills, we can help them take steps to publicly talk and listen to different voices in order to collaboratively work for the common good. As educators, part of our mission is to help students develop these skills and become effective leaders.

The classroom can be a forum where deliberative skills provide a fresh approach to active learning. A learning community can be developed in the classroom that will have a positive carry-over into activities outside the classroom to the other communities where our students are involved. The Study Circles process and materials provide structure to the discussions.

With current emphasis on collaboration and cooperative learning, building learning communities and learning organizations, we believe that deliberative dialogue will move us toward a true learning community and toward the development of a community of citizen leaders.

Deliberative skills consist of active listening, creative conflict, public dialogue and public judgement.

Active listening is observed when:

- You stay engaged with a person that you are listening to
- You are supportive of the speaker's efforts, whether or not there is agreement
- You search for underlying meaning
- You are non-judgemental

Creative conflict is observed when you are looking for constructive, honest confrontation. In creative conflict:

- You value and incorporate diversity
- You create an environment safe for difference
- You agree to disagree when there is no common ground
- You focus on the present and on solutions

In public dialogue you will observe talk in which differences are valued and there is search for understanding. In public dialogue:

- You believe that you create opportunities for public talk on matters that effect all of us
- You provide the opportunity to talk in a place where differences are valued
- You let trust build gradually
- You need resource material that present diverse perspectives

Public judgement has the hallmark of discriminating reason arrived at through talk and reflection. In public judgement:

- You arrive at better solutions through weighing several options
- You create greater willingness for tradeoffs
- You learn how to make hard choices

In deliberative forums, people strive for common ground for action rather than walking away as winners or losers.

Leslie L. Lambright (Community College Journal, February-March, 1995. "Creating a Dialogue") cites research studies in Bonwell and Eison's review of the literature which conclude that college students are unable to listen effectively after 15-20 minutes. Assimilation of information drops rapidly after this critical juncture. Additionally, retention of lecture material is minimal in all but the brightest listeners.

Paul Esner (Community College Week, 10/21/96, "Change Faster or Get Out of the Way") goes further in stating, "That everyone is an active learner and teacher through collaboration, shared responsibility and mutual respect; that the learning process includes the larger community through alliances, relationships and mutually benefiting opportunities; and that real learning occurs in a flexible and appropriate environment." He goes on to say, "Academia must recognize that a student's education is developed through a series of personal, group and team experiences designed by the institution or faculty with students."

As educators, who continually seek to improve, the incorporation of deliberative dialogue into educational settings will help us bring about the change Esner is presenting. We must think critically, creatively and differently. We must listen

carefully and think out loud. We must take responsibility for what we say, work in teams and come to terms with diverse, ambiguous meanings. We must do this ourselves and we must help our students (our leaders) to develop and use these skills.

Senge, who has tied together the concepts of leadership and learning organizations, indicates that in learning organizations leaders are "...designers, teachers and stewards. These roles require new skills: the ability to build shared vision, to bring to the surface and challenge prevailing mental models, and to foster more systemic patterns of thinking. In short, leaders in learning organizations are responsible for building organizations where people are continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future -- that is, leaders are responsible for learning." (Peter M. Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations".) Michael Briand brings back the importance of deliberative dialogue to leadership and to learning organizations in, "People Lead Thyselves", saying that the greatest single service a would-be leader could provide and the greatest challenge he/she may confront is to "help fellow citizens build and sustain good working relationships by deliberating, choosing and acting together."

We have history to support this thinking as well as excellent resources to assist us. From Sam Adams' Committees of Correspondence to the Chaugauqua Literary and Scientific Circles of the 19th Century, "It has been a way of life for Americans to come together to discuss common concerns. Cooperative, collective, deliberation and action, without the sacrifice of individual values is a democratic ideal that needs constant attention and nurturing as an informal, practical and effective method for adult learning and social change. This study circle is rooted in the civic movement of the 19th Century America. Study circles are voluntary and highly participative. They assist participants in confronting challenging issues and in making choices. The study circle is a small group democracy in action. All view points are taken seriously and each member has an equal opportunity to participate. The process is as important as the content. The goal of study circles is to deepen the participants understanding of an issue by focusing on the values that underline opinion. They seek common ground, areas of general agreement, but consensus or compromise is not necessary. Deliberation is the goal.

Our classrooms can be a forum where deliberative skills are first learned and then practiced. The Study Circle concept and supporting materials are an excellent beginning. To begin listening with an open mind is paramount. This is a skill that can be learned. In the deliberative process, each person strives to understand the position of those who disagree with them. Remarks are to be relevant and addressed to the group. Ideas and differences are to be freely expressed and challenged, but each is responsible to monitor his/her attitude, body language, reason versus emotion, in order to further deliberation. Discussions conducted in classrooms with deliberative dialogue skills can be a fresh approach to active learning. This classroom experience can and should train students to move beyond the data and arguments as presented in a lecture

or textbook to a consideration of information within a broad social context and toward a heightened appreciation of what the information means to their fellow students ... learning and knowing are communal acts." (*Politics for the 21st Century*, Kettering Foundation).

Helpful Resources:

Bohm, David, On Dialogue. David Bohm Seminars, P.O. Box 1452, Ojai, CA 93023

Study Circles Resource Center
Route 169, P.O. Box 203
Pomfret, CT 06258
203-928-2616

Fariand, Maria and Sarah Henry. Politics for the Twenty-First Century: What Should be Done on Campus?
Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2460n Kerper Blvd., Dubuque, IA 52004-0539,
Phone: 1-800-338-5578.